

A MASONIC MINUTE

The Tracing Board in the Third Degree – Illustrating our Traditional History



[c] 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025

At the outset it must be understood that in this Grand Jurisdiction there is no authorized or standardized form for the Tracing Boards that are used to illustrate the lectures in the Three Degrees. These *aide memoires* were evolved from the original practice of ‘tracing or drawing the lodge’ in chalk on the floor by the Tyler when lodges met in the function rooms of taverns and alehouses during the early eighteenth century and before. This was followed by the use of large boards placed on trestles in the centre of the lodge, giving rise to the term “*trestle board.*” Finally, the illustrations on small portable boards familiar to us today originated in England from the hand of several artists, the best known being Bro. John Harris (1791?-1873) described as a painter of miniatures and an architectural draughtsman. ¹ Bro. Christopher Hodapp has aptly described them as ‘eighteenth century power point presentations.’ ²

While the Junior Warden and the Senior Warden often refer to the respective Tracing Board for their lectures in the first and second degrees, the Tracing Board for the Third Degree illustrating the Traditional History Lecture is usually neglected. Some lodges use a ‘grave cloth’ which duplicates and symbolizes the Tracing Board during the raising ceremony.

It would be most informative to have the **Traditional History Lecture** in mind while studying the Third Degree Board which illustrates it.

The dominant feature on the Board is the **Coffin**. Note the orientation marked on the border: head to the **West** and feet to the **East**. This is the traditional form of burial, facing the rising Sun, dating to earliest times and continued in many cemeteries to the present day. At the head is placed the **Acacia** which led one of the search parties to discover the place where the murdered Master had been hurriedly buried.

Placed upon the coffin are many significant symbols relating to the Third Degree ceremonies.

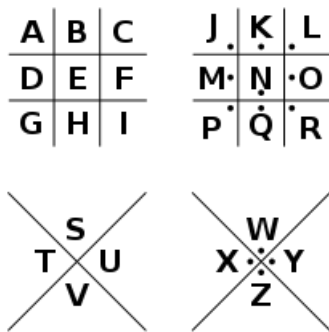
¹ Rees, Julian. *Tracing Boards of Three Degrees in Craft Freemasonry Explained*. Lewis Masonic, 2009.

² Hodapp, Christopher. *Freemasons For Dummies*

- The Working Tools of the Degree
- Name Plate in Masonic Cipher (Harris Code)
- Skull and Cross Bones, the emblems of death
- The Porch and Dormer with the Square Pavement
- Three 5's
- The three tools with which the Master was attacked
- The Square, the jewel of office worn by the Master

The **Masonic Cipher** or Harris Code – also known as the ‘Pigpen Code.’

The diagram below will enable you to decipher the figures that appear on the coffin. Remember to read fro R to L!



The date **A.L. 3000** Based upon a study of Biblical chronology, Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656), an Irish prelate, calculated the creation of the world occurred in 4000 BCE. It is this date that Freemasonry refers to as Anno Lucis (Year of Light).³ Ussher also calculated that the Temple of Solomon was completed in the year 3000 BCE from creation. As the Master was slain just before the Temple was completed, the date of his death is given as A.L. 3000.

The **Three 5's** may have several interpretations. They may refer to the three search parties of Fellowcrafts dispatched by King Solomon to search for the missing Master. Note the position around the coffin. Perhaps this may also refer to the positions taken by the Junior and Senior Wardens and the Worshipful Master as they attempt to raise the body by the several grips. A grip is given by applying the five digits of the right hand. The raising results in the formation of the **5 Ps of F**.

All of which suggests that the Third Degree Tracing Board is well worth a close study. It could form an excellent review for the newly raised Candidate on the evening he proves his proficiency in the Third Degree.

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³ Genesis “In the beginning God said, Let there be Light”